The Challenges and Countermeasures of Returning Overseas Teachers in Chinese Universities

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Abstract. With the deepening of the internationalization of higher education in China, more and more returning teachers have returned to colleges and universities to teach. This study takes returning teachers with overseas education backgrounds as the main research object, and systematically analyzes the core challenges they face, such as reverse cultural shock, identity restructuring, and institutional barriers. Based on the theory of academic identity and the theory of cross-cultural adaptation, the study found that rigid assessment mechanisms and insufficient organizational support often become bottlenecks that hinder their career development. Research shows that measures such as building an inclusive academic network, focusing on teaching quality rather than quantity, and strengthening the tutor system can effectively help returning teachers achieve a smoother career adaptation. The research results not only provide a theoretical basis for improving the quality of talent training, but also put forward policy suggestions for promoting the international development of China's higher education.

Keywords: Returnee Teachers, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Academic Identity, Institutional Support, Higher Education Internationalization.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has made key progress in the process of localization of higher education, thanks to the strong support of the national talent return strategy and the academic globalization strategy [1]. Among them, more and more overseas returnees are called returned teachers, and they return to Chinese universities to teach. These returning teachers have become an important force in the country's strategy of developing top universities and enhancing international competitiveness [2]. Their profound international educational background, diversified teaching concepts, and cross-cultural experience are expected to inject strong impetus into the reform and modernization of China's higher education.

It is not easy to return to China. Many returning educators often encounter countercultural shocks when adapting to the local education system [3]. Due to the strict administrative management and strict assessment mechanism of domestic colleges and universities, they generally reflect that the school values scientific research results more than teaching quality [4]. In addition, the lack of institutional support and professional network can easily cause pressure and conflict, resulting in a decline in job satisfaction [5]. Although there is less attention from curriculum research or pedagogy experts with educational backgrounds, the current research hotspots are mainly concentrated among returning scholars in the field of science or economics [6].

Since the work of returning teachers is directly involved in teaching, culture, and student interaction, it is of great significance to understand the challenges they face in the process of adaptation to promote effective teaching reform and the internationalization of higher education [7]. From a theoretical point of view, this helps to deeply understand how returning teachers reconstruct their academic identity and adapt to the local academic environment [5,8]. At the same time, the research also expands the application of cross-cultural adaptation theory to the field of teacher education. At the practical level, this study provides universities and policymakers with insights into improving institutional support. By identifying challenges such as assessment pressure, limited guidance resources, and lack of teaching innovation support, institutions can establish a more perfect teacher career development system [4,9].

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the key difficulties encountered by returning teachers with overseas educational backgrounds in Chinese higher education institutions and to propose practical strategies to assist their adaptation and professional growth. More specifically, it aims to address three main questions: Firstly, what kinds of challenges do these returning teachers experience in their work and integration process? Secondly, how do cultural, academic, and institutional factors affect their adaptation process and teaching satisfaction? Finally, what strategies should colleges and universities and policymakers adopt to help these teachers successfully integrate and contribute to the internationalization of higher education?

2. Challenges

2.1. Cultural Adaptation and Reverse Culture Shock

In recent years, the phenomenon of returning teachers studying abroad to teach in Chinese universities has increased significantly, which has become an important force for promoting the internationalization of higher education. However, their reintegration is often not smooth. Many studies have shown that these returning teachers face the dual challenges of cultural adaptation and reverse cultural shock [4,5]. Returning educators often find that after years of living abroad, the familiar environment has become strange, leading to psychological pressure, language barriers, and conflicts of values [10]. More than 80% of young returning teachers frankly said that it was difficult for them to adapt to the double pressure of Chinese society and academic life [11]. Although they bring a student-centered, open, and inclusive teaching concept, traditional teaching methods and institutional inertia often limit teaching innovation [12].

2.2. Academic Identity Reconstruction and Social Integration

The reconstruction of academic identity is another major challenge. Identity is a fluid and ever-changing concept that must be continuously negotiated in a changing social and academic environment [5]. After returning to China, scholars need to balance overseas academic training and local norms - the latter tend to pay more attention to ideological fit and administrative compliance than innovation. Returned scholars often question their overseas experience, and the domestic academic community generally underestimates or misreads their international professional literacy. This contradiction will lead to self-doubt and role blurring, especially when interacting with students, colleagues, and managers. It is easy to be regarded as an outsider, thus falling into a cognitive dilemma between a global vision and local institutional norms.

At the same time, there are new challenges in the social relations within colleges and universities. Many returning scholars find themselves in a dilemma: they can neither maintain close contact with their international counterparts nor integrate into local academic circles. Since informal relationships are often seen by Chinese scholars as an important way to build connections, financial cooperation and project partnerships sometimes take priority over academic quality. As a result, even scholars with rich international experience may feel left out of key discussions and decision-making. Over time, this ongoing sense of exclusion can reduce their motivation and confidence within the local academic community.

2.3. Institutional and Structural Barriers

Institutional factors also play a key role in shaping and adapting. China's higher education system is still dominated by quantitative evaluation standards, overemphasizing the number of projects, scientific research funds and the number of papers published, while neglecting the quality of teaching and innovation [4]. The lack of a clear career path and the guidance and support of tutors further increases the difficulty of adaptation, especially for newcomers to the workplace at the bottom of the academic inheritance system.

2.4. Teaching and Research Adaptation

In teaching practice, returnee scholars try to introduce Western educational methods such as critical thinking and interactive discussion into test-oriented classrooms. However, the existing assessment system often underestimates these innovations, and students who have become accustomed to traditional teaching models have difficulties in adapting to these new methods [11]. The research field places too much emphasis on short-term results, which makes it difficult to promote long-term innovation projects; junior returning scholars (although they have not yet obtained senior titles) often face many difficulties in obtaining scientific research funds or leading large-scale projects [13].

2.5. Individual and Psychological Coping

At the individual level, the coping mechanism has a significant impact on the adaptation effect. The adaptation process of returnees who actively participate in the career network and mentor system will be smoother than those who are isolated. Personality traits such as openness and cultural empathy are crucial to overcoming identity crises and reversing cultural shocks [11]. However, without sufficient institutional support, it is difficult to make up for the systemic disadvantage by personal efforts alone [14].

2.6. Policy and Organizational Environment

The academic management environment of higher education institutions directly affects the integration of returnees. The Western management model is in stark contrast to the strict hierarchy and patriarchal style of domestic institutions [10]. Driven by the dual first-class plan, the increasing internal competition has further compressed the space for inclusion, and international experience is often used as a gimmick for institutional image packaging, rather than really promoting reform [2]. At the national policy level, the funding mechanism is more biased towards senior scholars, and the support for young returnees is seriously Foot [15]. Decentralized management mechanisms and inconsistent evaluation standards not only hinder career development, but also lead to the loss of talent or the choice of further study abroad again.

3. Analysis

3.1. Analysis of Individual Factors

Young teachers returning from overseas often face three main types of challenges at the personal level: adapting to a new environment, understanding themselves better, and adjusting to new roles. Personal traits like being open-minded and good at communicating with others can really help during this process. Even though these teachers are usually very enthusiastic about teaching, they sometimes find that their hard work doesn't pay off as much as they hoped because they lack teaching experience or practical skills. In daily academic life, they may also find it hard to figure out how to interact properly with leaders, colleagues, and students, which shows the real struggle of adapting to a new role [4].

Everyone's ability to adapt to a new culture is different. Many returnees say they have trouble finding the right career direction, fitting into local culture, or communicating smoothly with peers. This often shows up as unrealistic expectations for themselves, limited understanding of local teaching traditions, or not enough hands-on classroom experience [11]. These personal differences can make the whole adaptation process more complicated, and the level of difficulty can vary from person to person.

3.2. Institutional Factors

The institutional environment deeply affects the adaptation process of returning teachers. The academic atmosphere and cultural ecology of colleges and universities directly determine whether

these teachers can smoothly integrate into the professional community. Due to the limited opportunities to participate in the local academic network, coupled with their marginal position in the institutional system, many returning teachers often feel marginalized.

The so-called marginalization means that individuals or groups cannot be fully recognized in the academic community, are deprived of opportunities to participate or institutional resources, and lack the right to make decisions. For returning teachers, this phenomenon is usually manifested in three forms: first, they are often placed on the edge of the academic network, and financial support and scientific research cooperation rely more on informal contacts rather than academic level; second, their overseas experience is often misread or underestimated, which not only weakens the influence of decision-making, but also reduces the ability of academic contributions. Visibility and recognition; Third, due to differences in academic communication methods and norms, it is easy to cause professional loneliness and cultural distance. These intertwined marginal factors make it more difficult for returning teachers to integrate into the local academic system, and their professional influence is also limited.

With the increasing globalization of higher education, universities expect that returning teachers can inject new vitality into international cooperation and improve the competitiveness of institutions. Although this expectation brings opportunities, it may aggravate the pressure of adaptation [2]. There is a significant difference between the highly centralized management model under the double first-class plan and the college tradition of Western universities. Academic autonomy and long-term career development may be hindered by administrative compliance and quantitative output-oriented evaluation mechanisms. The adaptation effect of returning teachers ultimately depends on the interaction between personal characteristics and the institutional environment [14].

3.3. National Policies and Social Support

At the national policy level, there is an obvious imbalance between the quality of government fund allocation and the demand for overseas talent. Specifically, some young returning teachers who have not obtained academic titles find it difficult to obtain competitive scientific research funding support. At the same time, Chinese universities still have institutional shortcomings in the introduction and management of overseas talent. At present, there is a lack of a central coordinating body with unified decision-making power, and it is impossible to effectively coordinate the introduction, management, evaluation and incentive mechanism for returning talents. This situation makes it difficult for young returnees to integrate into the unified management system at the national level, and it is difficult to provide strong support for their development [12].

In terms of social support, new teachers often face the challenge of integrating into the university culture and community. The mentor system sometimes focuses more on formal compliance than substantive professional guidance. Therefore, although many new teachers have gradually adapted to teaching and scientific research, they may have concerns about trying innovative teaching methods due to a lack of support or fear of breaking the established norms [15]. Strengthening the practical mentor system and peer support system will help promote more sustainable career development for returning teachers.

4. Strategies and Recommendations

4.1. Individual-Level Coping and Development Strategies

At the individual level, returning teachers can adopt a variety of coping strategies and development methods to promote integration and career growth. They should maintain a positive and inclusive attitude, objectively view the differences and gaps between China and Western countries, and rationally treat the shortcomings of domestic universities in terms of institutional mechanisms, management and cultural environment. Improving ideological and political literacy is of great significance for consciously integrating into the education and construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

If returning teachers can adapt to the working environment of domestic universities, they can more smoothly apply the global vision and skills accumulated during their overseas study [11]. They can also try to find a balance between cultivating local teaching skills and building international competitiveness. By participating in activities such as online communication, teaching innovation and academic exhibition, they can actively promote career development. Joining the local academic community through mentor guidance or cooperative projects also helps them grow professionally and achieve long-term career integration.

4.2. Institutional and Policy-Level Measures

To better support the integration and professional growth of returning teachers, universities and policymakers need to take targeted actions at different levels.

Helping returning teachers deal with career and interpersonal challenges requires creating opportunities for them to connect with the local academic community. Universities can promote meaningful communication and knowledge sharing through collaborative research, joint seminars, and peer mentoring programs. These efforts can help returning teachers gain recognition, feel more included, and build a stronger sense of belonging - factors that are essential for long-term professional development.

In addition, improving the fairness and quality of academic evaluation means shifting from a numbers-based approach to one that focuses more on quality and impact. Adopting methods such as representative work evaluations and setting up transparent systems--like expert recusal mechanisms, feedback channels, and complaint procedures--can reduce bias and make evaluations more fair and credible [16]. By refining evaluation standards, universities can encourage teachers to focus more on meaningful teaching innovation and long-term research outcomes rather than simply increasing the number of published papers.

Universities should formulate a clear plan for international development from the organizational level, and enhance their global academic influence by forming international research teams, establishing cooperative alliances with internationally renowned universities, and gathering the leadership and experience of top returning scholars.

Institutions should also implement a creative and flexible teaching management mechanism, fully respect the professional skills of local talents and returnees, and ensure that they enjoy fair opportunities in career development and personal growth.

Systematic security and financial support are equally crucial to promoting the development of returnees. Simplifying administrative procedures, such as participating in the review and approval of international conferences and the qualification certification of academic exchanges, and improving the overseas fund management mechanism can create a better working environment for returnees [9]. Strengthening the institutional guarantee mechanism will help build a stable and inclusive environment so that returning teachers can more effectively promote the internationalization of higher education.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigates the integration problems and strategies of foreign returning teachers in Chinese universities. The research identified three challenges that were interconnected: adapting to a new culture, reconstructing academic identity, and dealing with institutional barriers. Analysis reveals that homecoming teachers are likely to experience reverse culture shock, be unsupported institutionally, and possess indistinct professional identities. The atomization of the academic community, the defective tutor system, and the quantity- quality oriented assessment mechanism strictly constrain its exertion value in teaching and scientific research innovation. The study found that the challenges faced by returning teachers are not only caused by personal factors but also closely related to the broader organizational and policy environment. To better support their integration, universities should strengthen professional development, improve the evaluation system to encourage

innovation, and create a more inclusive learning atmosphere. For young returning teachers to build stable careers, continuous institutional support and financial security from policymakers are also essential. By promoting an open and cooperative academic culture, universities can turn the experience of returning teachers into a lasting driving force for educational change. Future research should take a comparative and long-term approach to track how returning teachers develop in different disciplines and types of institutions. Examining the relationship between international academic mobility and education policy reform can also offer deeper insights into how these teachers act as important forces for modernization and internationalization in China's higher education system.

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